

\c2\secrets

Friday, 25 March 1989

Reflections on Cuba II

It has become clear in the last year, by comparing the assertions of former Kennedy officials in recent conferences on the Cuban Missile Crisis with recently-revealed documents, that on certain matters, at least, these officials are still lying or attempting to conceal the truth. My own notes and documents from 1962-64 point to this same conclusion on other aspects of the crisis. *Russia's ultimate position: Wf? What else? + some issues of very + long*

When I made this point at a CPS/NA seminar at Harvard, David Welch and James and Janet Blight found it extremely unsettling, in part because their own recent book on the crisis relies, in its interpretations, heavily on the presumed candor of their interviewees. "Are you saying that our book is worthless, that nothing these people say can be believed?" both Blights asked in great dismay. *Assumption: no deliberate withholding... no some withholding, deliberate*

also: much that you know, or some did, but still wait now. Of course, my conclusion that certain of the statements made at the conferences or to the interviewers were untrue or deliberately misleading did not mean that the testimony was worthless, still less the book as a whole. It did mean--as should have been taken for granted from the beginning--that any assertions heard might be misleading, indeed totally false. This would seem to be the right presumption for any journalist, historian, detective or juror, seeking truth amidst controversy.

This applies to any "witness," but especially to a current or former government official, as I.F. Stone has pointed out: "All government officials lie, and nothing they say is to be believed." (I.e., believed with high confidence, without questioning it, without corroborative evidence.)

That principle may not--as it should--be engraved on the walls of the John F. Kennedy School of Government, but it ought not have occasioned so much shock as it did when I cited it. It is not that everything officials say is a lie, or the opposite of the truth (interpreting their statements might be simpler if that were the case). The reality is that anything they say, no matter how plausible and with what convincing fervor they say it, may be a lie, or deliberately misleading.

This is above all true of national security officials, as in this case. For them, lying convincingly is part of their job. Willingness to lie about certain matters and the ability to lie consistently and persuasively is one of the important practical requirements for getting and holding office in the higher or more "sensitive" parts of the national security bureaucracy (or for being involved at all in these regions, including secretaries and assistants).

This remark by me at the seminar caused particular consternation among the several listeners from the Kennedy School. They took it as intolerably cynical. Indeed, it is not a commonplace observation even within the government. Yet as a proposition or a practical experience, it could only be unfamiliar to someone who had never held a high security clearance. High national security officials--and their assistants and secretaries (like Fawn Hall, now testifying, as I write this, about her shredding of evidence) would quickly recognize an obligation to lie as another side of their access to secrets, a requirement of the operation of a secrecy system.

To keep those "unauthorized" from knowing or guessing at information that is "closely guarded, highly protected"--in particular, information that is classified higher than Top Secret, and information of other sorts that is regarded as comparably "sensitive"--it is not enough to refrain from mentioning it, nor, where a truthful or complete answer to a direct question would reveal the content or existence of such data, is it acceptable to respond: "No comment," "I'm not allowed to answer that," or "That's secret."

Given the context of the question or the prior knowledge of the questioner, such a response might lead to a correct or otherwise unwanted inference by the listener, or at the least could stimulate a search on their part for other witnesses or evidence that could lead them to the hidden knowledge. So answers like that--not directly helpful but not untruthful--are admissible only to protect (for a relatively limited period) low-level, less sensitive secrets.

but to avoid

Where it is important to avoid not only immediate, correct understanding in the mind of the listener but certain kinds of guesses at it or an active effort or search to discover what is being concealed, it is essential that a positive, skillfully misleading or untruthful answer be given to a potentially dangerous question. The untruth might be, "I don't know," or "I'm not aware of that" or "That's never been under consideration, so far as I know," or it may be a more concrete falsehood or distraction.

Those who accept such responsibilities are given to understand that they have not only a license to lie in such circumstances, it is their obligation to lie. They are led to believe that this is a legal obligation, subject to prosecution and imprisonment for violating it; in most cases this happens to be false--they are being lied to in this respect, though those "briefing" them may be ignorant of the falsehood--though with respect to certain narrow classes of secrets it is true.

What is more practically important in controlling their behavior is that their willingness to lie and their skill at deceit in this pursuit is a condition of their continuing "access" to sensitive secret information of this sort, which in turn is a condition of their being invited into influential, prestigious meetings and discussions and to being entrusted with certain important assignments and roles. Thus their ability to hold their jobs, and to rise in their careers is hostage, in part, to their willingness and ability successfully to dissimulate and deceive: not just strangers, but in many cases close colleagues who do not happen to be "authorized" to learn certain facts, intentions, missions or expectations.

A diplomat is said to be an official sent abroad to lie for his country. But the same kind of improvisational "acting ability" is called for among many officials who do not go abroad, and as much within high government circles as in dealings with members of Congress, the press or the public.

The dismay exhibited by the Kennedy School analysts when presented with evidence that they had been lied to, and still more at the suggestion that this should not be regarded as highly surprising--in other words, the suggestion that their earlier absence of skepticism had been somewhat naive--reflected, I suspect, several judgments on which their credulity had been based.

First, perhaps, unwarranted confidence that officials--especially Kennedy officials?--did not lie to scholars from the Kennedy School at Harvard as they might to the public. Second, several of the officials in question, such as McNamara and Bundy, had won their special trust both by their political stance and values and by their face-to-face demeanor of candor, and their readiness and even eagerness to participate in the retrospective discussions. Third, the events in question were twenty-five years old: what secrets would need keeping that long?

Actually, they need not have felt quite so chagrined at the evidence that they had been conned: it was not done frivolously or "unnecessarily" and it was not carried off by amateurs. The people who misled them had been practiced in doing this, and drilled in the necessity of doing it, over long careers; and though they were mostly retired now and the events in question were long gone, they felt they carried a license and a duty to lie about these particular matters that would never expire for the rest of their lives.

In the case of covert operations, for example, or of communications intelligence, that is a formal property of the classified access: the information is never automatically declassified with the passage of time, nor ever loses its highly sensitive status. They might be willing to allude to aspects of

these that had become public knowledge through Congressional investigations or leaks--though even this would breach strict rules that could lose them clearances they were currently holding and jeopardize any prospect of holding them in future--but officials with this background were very unlikely to volunteer any information that could not be referenced to public sources. (There is a striking absence of any such revelation, for example, in McGeorge Bundy's recent voluminous history of the nuclear era, during six years of which he had unparalleled knowledge of secret data and operations).

and
This is ~~and~~ marginally less true, formally, for war plans; but in practice few of these have been subject to authorized release in less than thirty years.

But these are two of the categories which have been significantly concealed over the years--up to the present--in discussions of the Missile Crisis by former officials: the covert operations against Cuba in late 1961 and 1962, Operation Mongoose, and--just recently disclosed in FOIA releases, but still "protected" in the recollections of McNamara and Bundy--high-level proposals in the spring of 1962 for aggressive military operations against Cuba, and urgent planning and preparations for such operations--invasion, airstrike or blockade--directed and monitored by the President and by McNamara, in the fall of 1962, just prior to the Missile Crisis.

In the absence of official disclosure in the intervening period, it would not be expected--by someone knowledgeable about the secrecy system--that McNamara or Bundy or the others would feel they had a right to reveal or discuss matters of this sort, even a quarter-century later.

But there are, in fact, reasons that go beyond formal job or clearance requirements that explain why these particular facts--and others that were never subject to these formal constraints but are concealed just as effectively just as long--benefit from such meticulous discretion.



[The questions I am moving toward here include:

What are officials still concealing and lying about, with respect to the Cuban Missile Crisis? What categories of events, operations, information; what specifically?

Why are they still lying? Why the secrecy?

What information has most recently become available (specifically, since the Hawks' ^{Key} seminar in the spring of 1987, and then at and since the Harvard Conferences in the fall of 1987)? How does it affect the interpretations made earlier?

What data from my own notes of 1962-64 has still not been publicly revealed nor disclosed by the participants in these discussions? What seem to be the reasons for this continued secrecy? How do these data affect recent, and earlier, interpretations?

What has been the effect, at various periods starting in 1962, of public (and in some cases, American official) ignorance of specific data that was still, at the time, kept secret and/or lied about? How have the various "lessons learned" been shaped by this evolving history of the manipulation of information? What may have been effects on policy, foresight, resistance? On resulting risks of war, and other costs?

What can we conclude in more general terms from this history and analysis about the motives, practices and effects of official secrecy and lying? When and why should we expect to be kept ignorant, and to be lied to, in future, and with what sorts of consequences?

What should we conclude--from the secrets they have kept, the lies they have told, and above all from the more comprehensive, hidden history of their decision-making that is now knowable--about the character, the values, aims, priorities, loyalties, of our past national security officials? Likewise for officials of the Soviet Union, and of our respective allies.

What were their actual, secret strategies and aims, expectations? What were their effective motives? What risks were they willing to run, for what incentives? What surprised them? What did they fail to foresee, or consider, or understand? What can be said of the actual risks we were facing, by their policies and choices? What various lessons did they individually draw; how did these affect their subsequent policies (e.g. in Vietnam); how might these have been different with more information or if they had asked different questions of their experience?

What other evolutions of the crisis seem to have been, in some sense, highly possible? How close were we to these, what would have had to happen to bring them about? What difference would it have made? What can be said of the actual risks we were facing, given their actual (or quite possible) policies and choices?

↓ can now give tentative answers to these — often difficult for what I would give before the new evidence, i.e. the K School data.

(There is both good and bad news, along this bottom line, in the new data; on balance, it will not be reassuring to the public or most elite analysts).

How can we lower such risks in the future? What can be learned from this history that will help us do that? How might less, more, or different official secrecy and lying--and correspondingly, public understanding--bear on such risk? How might it bear on the process of determination and the nature and content, as well as the effectiveness, of public policy?

Revealing Discussions, Considerations X

President - Presentations

McN. Shaw

Issues

Surprise - Failure
Approach

Party

Blame.

what you need
willing to consider

Alternatives

Advice/Proposals

Moving of Right/Mil

Patriotism since us. self-interested
Modernity of mass
(Religion)

things not only what you would have
done better, but "should have done" (right)
but what you might have done — worse — what
had this you will do in future? (one FUD; another)
Bouffles

(But, Bouffles) — vs. done

(Stevenson - nuclear bombs/Right

Could have done better; should not have considered
should be replaced or planned, intended, conditionally (not resisted):
e.g. Condor plan

Authority: (above what specific threat, or certainty of spec. sanction)

but your break

leaders: success (achieve any) (see Set for UC)

will no

never if will

don't stay committed/non-bluff/“real”

for US

(and if the
don't want it)

not to expose Pres (client) to approach

Reass by Saus

How to do it / what Pres' only intent

Not yet) united of Saus: justices

Not any with it.

uses REN's model of Surveilling below Pres (for Pres' awareness)

K School: BPM (beyond REN. odds instituted)

(REN model of Pres

not only used by - Pres. perspective, not self-interested

GA!)

“ought to”
should be united
“is his right
habit

section of other

if don't stay him

in of conscious

one suffis

guilt, if...

Wf not been
able to think...

Kith Oct 26

Malcolm: RK